IN THE SHADOW OF VIETNAM: CONFLICT OR CO-OPERATION

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"Asians don't play dominoes," a Southeast Asian Prime Minister commented in April 1975, when he was asked how the abrupt collapse of former President Thieu's regime in what was South Vietnam might affect the region as a whole. His statement is less facetious than it might at first seem. It has a direct bearing on the possible configuration of relationships -- still developing -- in Southeast Asia after the scurried end of American intervention in Indo-China, and the emergence of a unified Vietnam as a potential centre of influence in the region. The Prime Minister's comment betokens a conviction that the non-communist states of Southeast Asia, freed from the distortions and complications of direct Western participation in the region's diplomacy, are capable of building a new structure of linkages.

The occupation of former President Thieu's palace in Saigon (now Ho Chi Minh city) by an advance party of North Vietnamese troops on April 30, 1975 marked the end of 117 years (from 1858) of direct foreign involvement and influence in the affairs of Indo-China. The last phase of that period was a tragic story of American entrapment in a situation that required not only a major and complex commitment in Indo-China itself, but also a series of supportive activities in surrounding areas. For Indo-China, says a post-war study, April 1975 and the trends leading up to and beyond the events of that month meant that "direct foreign interference was abruptly and utterly liquidated, and the three Indo-Chinese states (were) in a position not only to live in peace and independence but also to speak for themselves." The obligation to "speak for themselves" was thrust on Indo-China's non-communist neighbours as well.

With the winding down of a range of operations in Southeast Asia that had been a concommitant of America's intervention in Vietnam since 1954, it was clear that the US could no longer be counted on as an ubiquitous ally. Some non-communist states had gnawing doubts about whether the US could even be considered a reliable friend. Britain, France, and Holland, the three other Western nations that exercised power in the region before, had withdrawn earlier. In and after April 1975, therefore, the non-communist states of Southeast Asia had to reconsider their options in very short order, grappling with a situation that seemed to cause anger or anguish or both in Southeast Asian capitals. (This paper does not cover Burma, whose reclusive style rules out informed analysis.)

Twenty-one years earlier, in 1954, President Eisenhower introduced the game of dominoes into the vocabulary of international politics, when he told a Washington press conference: "You have a row of dominoes set up, you knock over the first one, and what will happen to the last one is that it will go over very quickly." In the weeks preceding April 1975, the "dominoes" seemed to fear for their own survival. News reports recording the rapid collapse of Saigon's forces sent shock-waves through the capitals of neighbouring countries, causing a mood bordering on panic.

Perhaps in the future, some Southeast Asian leader, impressed by the potential profits of catharsis in public, and abetted by a latter-day David Frost, will tell us the fascinating story of how that panic was subdued in a hectic series of diplomatic exchanges involving a variety of proposals for "coming to terms" with the "new" Indo-China. That will have to wait.

For the present, however, we know that if "Asians don't play dominoes," they do play chess. Non-communist Southeast Asia's opening gambit in a diplomatic "game" that seems likely to be long and arduous was a declaration on May 14, 1975 in which the foreign ministers of ASEAN states (the Association of Southeast Asian Nations) "expressed their readiness to enter into a friendly and harmonious relationship with each nation in Indo-China," and "reiterated their willingness to co-operate with those countries in the common tasks of national development."

Bygones should properly remain bygones, the foreign ministers seemed to be saying. It did not matter that their countries had overtly or covertly supported American policy in Vietnam at one time or another; that Thailand, for instance, was described as a "landlocked aircraft carrier" of the US Indo-China Command; that some non-communist states of Southeast Asia had been secondary beneficiaries of the American military effort (as suppliers, buyers, providers of Rest and Recreation, and so on); that at the United Nations they had endorsed the validity of Gen. Lon Nol's rule in Cambodia. They were, above all, fellow Southeast Asians. Surely, they need not play dominoes?

This "sweetly reasonable" approach has to be balanced against another compulsion in Southeast Asian politics; what established authority in the regions calls the Communist Threat - a fear of subversion and/or attack by communist agents, forces, or whatever. As a Southeast Asian Defence Minister with a flair for picturesque patter once put it: "Communism is like hoof and mouth disease. It is always a potential threat...everywhere." The most readily perceived threat, of course, is from domestic insurgents, terrorists,

guerillas, or freedom fighters; one can describe them in terms of one's own persuasion, but there is no doubt at all about the perspective in which the governments of Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand see them.

It is reasonable to suppose that the communist victory in Vietnam - both the event, and the manner in which it came about - would have buoyed insurgents in the rest of Southeast Asia. Notebooks picked up in insurgent strongholds during Operation Big Star, the recent Thai-Malaysian counter-insurgency operation, described events in Vietnam as a situation that should "inspire" Southeast Asian insurgents to work harder at achieving their goals. Beyond the psychological factor, however, there is the fear that a victorious and militant Vietnam, strengthened by the acquisition of American arms, would supply and perhaps fight side-by-side with insurgent groups in the so-called domino countries. Vietnamese military writings refer to the importance of a "friendly hinterland" and "reliable rear areas." Would Southeast Asian insurgents be supplied from "reliable rear areas?" Or, as Tun Abdul Razak put it with charming delicacy, would Vietnam's military supplies "fall into the hands of smugglers who could sell them to lawless elements in neighbouring countries?"

Thai intelligence officials claim that Vietnamese weapons have already reached as far south as to units of the Liberation Army of Thailand on the Southern Front, in Surat Thani province. In February 1976 a member of Thailand's National Security Council said that a combined Thai/Vietnamese sapper unit trained in Vietnam was engaged in sabotage at government installations.

Generals, policemen and bureaucrats in Southeast Asia do not as a rule make pronouncements of this kind independently and unilaterally. Theirs is the overt expression of the political premise that Vietnamese support to local insurgents could decisively influence politics in non-communist Southeast Asia, and thereby alter the region's political and military balance. To be sure, much the same suspicion has been directed against China and the Soviet Union. Some of Southeast Asia's insurgent groups have set themselves up in China; others have taken sides in the schismatic dispute between China and the Soviet Union. Vietnam, however, is closer. Japan's raid on Kota Baru in Malaysia, which preceded the Japanese occupation of then Malaya and Singapore, was accomplished by bombers that took off from an airbase in Southern Vietnam. The strength of the Vietnamese People's Army, Vietnam's support for its allies in Cambodia and Laos during the events leading up to changes of regime there, and ancient rivalry between Thailand and Vietnam, tend to heighten suspicion and fear. Furthermore, there is also a fairly widespread belief in Southeast Asia that the leaders of a revolutionary movement are likely to be militant in their external relations in the period immediately following domestic success; that time cools revolutionary ardour.

The People's Army of Vietnam is a formidable organization: ideologically inspired, well trained and disciplined, tested in battle, heirs to a tradition that has tasted more victory than defeat. At the time of the fall of the Thieu Government in 1975, North Vietnam's military strength stood at 700,000 consisting of a 685,000-strong army, a 3,000-man navy, and an airforce of 12,000. This compares with a combined military manpower of 628,000 in the five ASEAN states. The comparison does not, in fact, give a true picture of military

imbalance because there is no such thing as an ASEAN force. The 628,000 servicemen in ASEAN countries are under national commands and, despite some instances of bilaterial security co-operation, have no training as, or orientation toward, unified operations.

Vietnamese armed forces have been slightly expanded by the recruitment of officers and men from the old Saigon army. More important, the People's Army unexpectedly received a bonanza of material from their erstwhile adversaries. The weaponry handed over or just left behind by Southern forces in 1975 included 550 tanks, 12,000 mortars, 47,000 grenade launchers, 1,648,580 rifles, 940 ships, over 200 fighters and fighter bombers, 466 helicopters, 42,000 trucks, and 130,000 tons of ammunition. This arsenal has been valued at between $2 and $4 billion. Some 40 to 50 percent of it is considered fully serviceable, although Vietnamese troops are not all familiar with the use of American weapons. Shells for some of the mortars could be obtained from China, which makes replicas. Nor has there been post-war demobilization in Vietnam. On the contrary, the Politbureau in Hanoi has called for "a stronger and more modern army."

Almost 20 years ago Ho Chi Minh insisted that the armed forces, while defending the motherland "must actively participate in production, and contribute to economic construction." He was said to be emphasizing a historical tradition: Ancient Vietnamese dynasties are said to have deployed their troops in the countryside where they engaged in farming and construction, in addition to fulfilling their military obligations. According to recent reports from Vietnam, something of the same pattern is being followed by the People's Army today. The army rebuilt part of the old Hanoi-Saigon rail link, and has been working in mines and at building sites. This ennobling example of an armed service actually turning from guns to pick axes, if not ploughshares,

might have served to put the rest of Southeast Asia at ease but for the nagging suspicion that a communist government with an impressive military establishment at its disposal, and with its revolutionary zeal very much alive, would feel an obligation to place its experience and resources at the disposal of neighbouring revolutionary movements.

Lenin defined the international obligations of the communist movement unequivocally. He said: "There is only one way of being a genuine internationalist; to strain all our energies in an endeavour to develop the revolutionary struggle in our own land; to support that struggle in every way, by propaganda, sympathy, material aid; and support only that struggle in every country without exception. Everything else is a snare and a delusion." Theoreticians of the Chinese Communist Party followed this line, emphasizing that "the preletariat in the socialist countries, with the assistance of the world preletariat and the working masses of oppressed nations, defend the fruits of victory which the proletarian revolution has already achieved, and, at the same time, supports the continuous advance of proletarian revolution in other countries, continuously diminishing the strength of imperialism until capitalism has perished and socialism has triumphed throughout the world."

Theory is often leavened by day-to-day realities, however. A country's perception of its national priorities and interests, and the strategy it chooses for the furtherance of those concerns and interests, may have a greater influence than ideology on the conduct of its external relations. Vietnam's domestic concerns are centred on recovery from the blows of war, and the creation of a new political and economic order throughout the country. The dimensions of that task are so great, that it will require a total mobilization of domestic resources. Moreover, there are very clear indications that Vietnam does not believe these tasks can be accomplished in isolation.

The US National Academy of Sciences estimates that Agent Orange, a defoliant sprayed over Vietnam by US forces, destroyed 36 percent of the country's coastal mangrove forests, and extensively damaged inland forests. Some damage might take a century to restore, the Academy's study said. A UN mission led by Walter Umbricht of the IRC toured Vietnam last year, and reported that 183 dams, and 884 irrigations works in the North had been bombed during the war, and over 350 kms of railway track destroyed. In the South, the report said, one million hectares of arable land had been abandoned. One in every 20 people suffered from venereal disease; one in every 20 was a drug addict. The report commented: "In view of the magnitude of the disaster it is obvious that the work of national reconstruction far surpasses the human and material possibilities of the Vietnamese people." That is reality. So is post-war crop failure, caused by poor weather.

The UN mission recommended that Vietnam should give priority to the development of the agricultural sector, including clearing new land, and restoring abandoned land to use; and to the reconstruction of communications. These priorities have been written into Vietnam's current (1976/80) Five Year Plan. The Plan calls for an 18 percent increase of Gross National Product in 1977; with agriculture growing by 16 percent. Land reclamation improved irrigation, greater use of high yielding varieties of rice, intercropping and mechanization are all part of planned agricultural activity. The 1977 target for rice production is 14 million tons, from 12 million tons in 1976. Some 270,000 hectares of land are to be reclaimed. The afforestation target is 200,000 hectares. The Plan also covers industry, transport, communication, and trade expansion. The current emphasis on reconstruction could be seen, too, when the Political Report presented to the Fourth Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam in December 1976 stressed "scientific and technical revolution" as much as it did political revolution.

War-ravaged Vietnam cannot afford extra-territorial diversions while undertaking national reconstruction. Moreover, aid agencies from which Vietnam seeks assistance are unlikely to loosen their purse strings unless they are convinced that Vietnam is, in fact, more serious about reconstruction than about revolutionary obligations abroad. Vietnam has sought and received IMF financing. It has also sought World Bank aid, and two World Bank teams have so far visited Vietnam. The new government has also approached the Asian Development Bank with an offer to take over the $5 million debt of the Thieu regime if the ADB will release the $39 million promised before April 1975 but not disbursed. These loans, if they are forthcoming, would be spent on a hydro-electricity project near Ho Chi Minh City, expanding the electric power system generally, developing coal mines, a railway, equipment factory, and assorted farming and fishing programs. Vietnam has also invited private foreign investment.

In the context of these priorities, it is not surprising that a report on The Fundamental Concept of our Foreign Policy, endorsed by the National Assembly in June last year, held out the hand of friendship to all countries. The report said that Vietnam was "ready to establish and develop relations of friendship and co-operation with other countries in Southeast Asia on the basis of respect for each other's independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity, non-aggression and non-interference in each other's internal affairs, equality, mutual benefit, and peaceful co-existence." The report also expressed Vietnam's desire "to establish and expand normal relations between our country and all countries with different social systems, on the basis of respect for each other's independence, sovereignty, equality and mutual benefit." Some days later, the Vietnamese Foreign Ministry formulated these and related ideas as a code of conduct that would govern Vietnam's relations with other Southeast Asian states. The emphasis was on "good neighbourly relations," "economic co-operation" and

"co-operation among countries in the region for the building of prosperity in keeping with each country's specific conditions."

Deputy Foreign Minister Phan Hien toured Southeast Asia shortly after the "code" was formulated. As a result of his Kissinger-like exertions Vietnam has established relations with all five ASEAN countries. Trade agreements have been signed with Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Indonesia. Vietnam has sought Malaysian assistance in rubber and palm oil research. It is also negotiating long-term credit from Singapore to finance trade with that country. Last month, Vietnam, Thailand, and Laos signed a joint communique agreeing in principle to reactivate the Mekong Delta project.

Vietnam is a communist state, and will remain so in the foreseeable future. But it has shown both a sense of flexibility, and a remarkable lack of bitterness, in its external relations. Less than a year after reunification, it has demonstrated its desire to accept assistance and friendship from wherever these might come. It will undoubtedly react sharply to any perceived threat - external or internal - against its security and integrity. Political and military security are as much a part of national interests as economic reconstruction. Countries that live in the shadow of Vietnam will continue to be harrassed by insurgency, until the causes of insurgency are removed. If these countries are able to keep domestic and external issues separate, to be realistic, flexible and innovative in dealing with a country that is still something of an "unknown" to them, they may find a willing and useful partner in the adventures of nation building that still lie ahead - and, who knows, in the search for the peace and stability that have eluded Southeast Asia.

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